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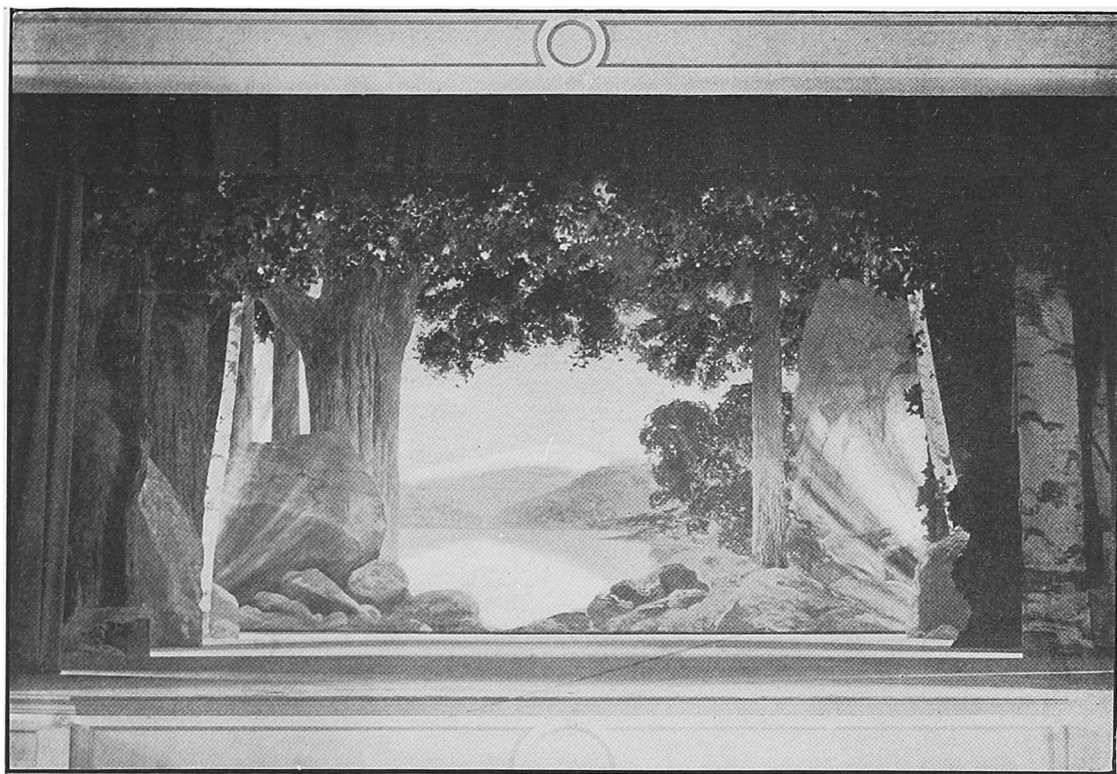
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WOODLAND SET DESIGNED BY MAXFIELD PARRISH FOR THE LITTLE COMMUNITY THEATER OF PLAINFIELD, NEW HAMPSHIRE

WHY NOT A LITTLE COMMUNITY THEATER FOR YOUR TOWN?

BY CONSTANCE D'ARCY MACKAY

Author of "The Trend of the Theater," "Costumes and Scenery," etc., etc.

AT the present writing some fifty Little Community Theaters are flourishing in different cities and villages of the United States because both villages and cities are beginning to realize that the art of the theater can be used as a great community force working for culture and solidarity. By *community* theater one means a theater where the audience, players, scenic and costume designers (and even at times the playwrights) are drawn from the people themselves.

Whole communities are discovering that a Little Theater, if properly managed, can support itself while giving joy to the city or village in which it is situated. In civic value it equals the pageant; in art value its enthusiasts believe that it surpasses the pageant, because pageants are sporadic while Little Theaters are permanent. Pageants are by their nature expensive; Little Theaters are inexpensive. *They put art into the hands of the people at moderate cost.* Indeed a Little Theater's insignificant cost of maintenance makes one prophesy that during these dark and troubled times of war the Little Theater will be the theater of the day. It will hold its place artistically and above all, civically, for its civic importance cannot be overestimated. To cite a few examples, Galesburg, Illinois, has a Little Theater owned by the community, a theater that has been remodeled from a saloon into one of the most charming playhouses of the Middle West, where the best and most poetic of modern drama is offered at a moderate sum. The people of Duluth, Minnesota,

own their own little Community Theater—in this case remodeled from a church. Here they give plays by Galsworthy, Synge and Sir James Barrie at movie theater rates! Both Granville Barker and Lady Gregory have spoken in high praise of this little theater. Uncle Sam is backing the Little Theater of Fargo, North Dakota, because the government sees in this experiment of a "Little Theater for Farmers" a new and potent influence in country life. Creative work is the foe of monotony.

Richmond Hill, Long Island; Montclair and Newark, New Jersey; Rochester, Buffalo and Bridgeport have Little Community Theaters. So have Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, Washington and New Orleans; Provincetown and Northampton, Mass.; Erie and Brookfield, Pa.; Kansas City, Kansas—the list is too long to be given here. Cleveland, Ohio, is having a Little Community Theater made over from a church. This theater will be used as a community center to develop community art.

Therefore the question arises: "Why not a Little Community Theater for *your* town?"

"How," cry the citizens, "shall we go about having one?"

And the answer is: First, by calling together all the artists and potential artists of your community. Secondly, by meeting all your problems and difficulties and contingencies in advance so that your Little Community Theater will begin its existence on a paying basis.

You must decide whether you will have a Little Theater like that in St. Louis, Mo., where the

players give all their time to the work and receive a small salary; or whether you will have a Little Theatre like that in Detroit, Michigan, where all the players give their services without recompense and where only the director receives a salary. You must then decide the matter of a building in which to house your theater; its accessibility and practicality.

For Little Theaters that pay no salaries to their players \$2,000 a season seems to be the usual sum for maintenance, if strict economy is practiced. This sum, if the theater is properly managed, is put back into the theater fund and whatever is made, over and above this is paid out for any extra expenses the theater may incur.

To reduce the theater budget to \$2,000 a season, some one in the Little Theater group *must* have a knowledge of pigments; of how to build scenery from compo board as well as canvas; of how to use the draped stage, or, as it is technically called, the stage hung with curtains. Either the director or the theater artist must also know how to use and re-use certain scenic effects in combinations that will not be detected by the audience. This is where the ingenuity of the community is aroused. A knowledge of the use of inexpensive materials is also necessary, if the theater is to be managed for this sum, for the inexpensiveness of the costumes



SCENE FROM DUNSANY'S "GLITTERING GATE" AS PLAYED BY THE ARTS AND CRAFTS, DETROIT

depends upon how great or how beautiful an effect can be secured through sateen, cotton poplin, mercerized cotton, cheese cloth and crêpon. Here is where a knowledge of dyes is also invaluable. And last, but not least, if expense is to be kept down, there must be some one experienced in painting scenes with lights. This, if certain scenes

have to be used again, will greatly lessen their monotony for the audience. An outdoor scene painted with amber light can be made to appear quite differently when given a moonlit effect with blue and white lights. Such knowledge forms the stock-in-economy of every Little Theater in this country.

The reader of this article will have gathered from what has already been said that each Little Theater works out its expense account differently, its budget being modified by the price of seats, the number of seats, and the number of performances per week or per month, as well as the policy of the particular theater, and whether or not it is addicted to the subscription system. All these things have a bearing on the budget.

Little Theaters are adverse to giving out an *itemized* list of their running expenses. The reason for this becomes apparent when one considers that the salaries of players and director will be made



THE VAGABOND PLAYERS OF THE VAGABOND THEATER, BALTIMORE, MD.

public, and they are sure to be moderate. Very often an extremely efficient director will be willing to take a small salary—a mere living wage—for the pleasure of working out his ideas under Little Theater conditions. But he does not care to have this wage made public. Artists who design scenery and costumes, actuated by a love for the thing done, may take in return a mere pittance. But it might jeopardize their prices for other work were the exact amount of this pittance known.

The Workshop Theater of Chicago has been able to equip its tiny playhouse, pay for rent, light, scenery, costumes and printing, for \$2,000 a year—not a season, a full year. Other Little Theaters are run for \$2,000 a season; but the Chicago Workshop Theater achieved the distinction of *running a whole year for \$2,000*; producing thirty-one one-act plays.

The Prairie Players of Galesburg, Ill., renovated a building, installed seats, a stage, a box office and lighting system; paid for their scenery, lighting, printing, cleaning and heating on a capital of \$1,050 for one season's expenditure. But then, rents and living are lower by two-thirds in Galesburg than in Chicago or New York. Even so, this was a remarkable financial achievement only made possible because the whole town worked for the theater cheerfully lending everything the theater wanted to borrow. It was also possible because not one piece of canvas or one single costume was allowed to go to waste. Everything was painted and repainted, and dyed and redyed in order to achieve this result. The most rigid economy was exercised.

The wonder of running a Little Theater for \$2,000 is apparent when one considers that this \$2,000 budget can be stretched to cover rent, costumes, scenery, lighting, printing, stage carpentry work and cleaning. It is interesting to note that this is the exact sum yearly on which H. J. Grein ran his Independent Theater in London, England, the theater which first introduced G. Bernard Shaw to the English intellectuals. \$3,000 a season is, of course, a more liberal budget and means less pinching and scraping, less wear and tear on the artists' nerves.

Prices vary so in different parts of the country, and each Little Theater has such individual problems to meet that any scale suggested for their maintenance must of necessity be approximate.

Rent is not the same in Chicago, Ill., and in New Orleans, La., in Bridgeport and Baltimore. And rent is one of the chief problems connected with the Little Theater. Then, too, a Little Theater's policy has an immense deal to do with its upkeep. If the players are professional, or semi-professional and have weekly salaries, a totally different budget must be arranged for them from what is arranged for a Little Theater where the players are amateurs without salaries. Then, whether or not there is a professional director who is paid a salary is another great consideration. If the theater building is used all the time by the company playing and rehearsing in it, it naturally has a bearing on the general expense. If the theater is such that it can be let for concerts and lectures, it will help materially with the rent. The seating capacity also is a consideration for it regulates the theater tax. Every state in the Union has different laws regarding theater taxation. Theaters are taxed according

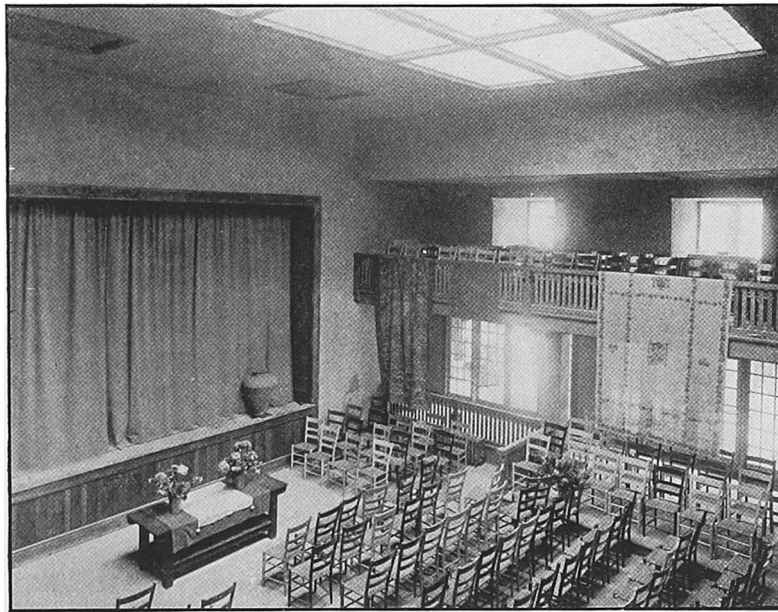
to seating capacity and as to whether or not tickets are sold at the door. A Little Theater tax may run from \$300 to \$500 per year in a large city, according to the State of the Union in which the theater is situated. Then, too, a theater fireman has to be retained on salary if the seating capacity runs above a certain point.

Many Little Theaters in cities avoid paying the theater tax and the fireman's salary

by doing away with the box office and depending entirely on subscription. This puts the theater on a club basis. All these things have to be taken into account in an estimate of theater cost.

In New York the Washington Square Players have the usual theater expenses save in salaries, and scenic and costume effects. It is with these that they make their point of difference. Their players are willing to take small salaries for the sake of what they are trying to do. By designing their own costumes and scenery the Washington Square Players cut out the middleman; and are on occasion able to re-use their material.

The Provincetown Players avoid the theater tax by doing away with the box office and organizing as a club is organized. They, too, design their own costumes and scenery. No set costs more than \$13.50. And many of them very much less than that. They use three sets each evening. Now and again a set is repainted and does duty twice over.



INTERIOR OF ARTS AND CRAFTS THEATER, DETROIT, MICHIGAN